

# Antisocial feminism? Shulamith firestone, monique wittig and proto-queer theory

Downing, Lisa

DOI:  
[10.3366/para.2018.0277](https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2018.0277)

License:  
None: All rights reserved

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Downing, L 2018, 'Antisocial feminism? Shulamith firestone, monique wittig and proto-queer theory', *Paragraph*, vol. 41, no. 3, pp. 364-379. <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.2018.0277>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

## **Publisher Rights Statement:**

This document is the accepted manuscript version of a published work that appeared in final form in Paragraph. To access the final edited and published work please visit: <https://www.eupublishing.com/doi/10.3366/para.2018.0277>

## **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

## **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# **Antisocial Feminism? Shulamith Firestone, Monique Wittig, and Proto-Queer Theory**

**LISA DOWNING**

Much so-called ‘second-wave’ feminism of the 1970s and 1980s is relatively little read and often maligned today, on the basis of what is currently politically fashionable. Questions of exclusiveness on the part of prominent names of the second-wave feminist movement are chief among the reasons why this literature and its ideas are dropping out of favour. We are now in an age of intersectional third-wave feminism, a feminism that has been described as defining itself “‘against” rather than just “after” the second wave’.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will firstly offer a critique of the effects of some recent iterations of intersectional feminism. I will then propose that reading certain second-wave feminist texts – here texts by Shulamith Firestone (1945-2012) and Monique Wittig (1935-2003) – through the lens of queer ethics and theories of normative power, rather than through the contemporary, third-wave, model of intersectionality (the tests of which they inevitably fail), may bring to light the still-relevant political value of older texts.

## **Intersectionality and its Discontents**

The theory of ‘intersectionality’ was first expounded in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s influential article ‘Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine’ (1989), which sought to show how looking at the position of black women with regard to discrimination law can avoid thinking of oppression erroneously as ‘disadvantage occurring along a single

categorical axis'.<sup>2</sup> The discrimination claims against employers brought by the women of colour discussed in Crenshaw's article were dismissed on the basis that neither discrimination on the grounds of sex nor on the grounds of race could be proved. (General Motors hired both white women in customer-facing roles and black men on the factory floor). Crenshaw demonstrates how the discrimination experienced by these women was located precisely at the crossroads of their sex and their race – a place that is neither occupied nor often seen by white feminists. While the ideas contained in Crenshaw's article offered a valuable and much-needed corrective to the blinkered, white-centric perspective of the law, and would influence feminism and critical race studies inside the academy in much-needed ways, the politics that it would go on to inspire in the twenty-first century has expanded considerably from Crenshaw's aims. In the decade of the 2010s, with much feminist and social justice activism being played out online, 'intersectionality' has become a ubiquitous ideology in feminism to the point that the slogan 'my feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!', coined by Flavia Dzodan as the title of an article for *Tiger Beatdown* in 2011,<sup>3</sup> has morphed into an Internet meme. It is instructive and important to note that this meme has since been marketized in order to profit others than Dzodan – in fact this feminist of colour has not seen a penny from the commodification of her words.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, these words are often accorded the status of a moral truism, questioned at the price of shaming or of feminist excommunication, with many – often white and 'privileged' – feminists policing each other's intersectional credentials.

When second-wave feminism is evoked, it is commonly seen to fail the test of intersectionality. Mann and Huffman write:

The second wave of American feminism was often blind to the ways its theories and political praxis failed to adequately address the everyday concerns of women of color and ethnicity [...]. It was also blind to how it appeared to many in the younger generation as an austere and disciplinary feminism. [...] By contrast, the new discourse of the third wave embraced a more diverse and polyvocal feminism that appealed to those who felt marginalized or restricted within the second wave.<sup>5</sup>

While the criticisms of the Anglophone second wave's white-centrism are undeniable, the language used here is significant. The third wave is presented as the ethical corrective to earlier feminism – and as a superior mode. This is, in itself, problematic. Firstly, the imposition of the political values of one age onto those of an earlier one is an anachronism which promotes a simplistic narrative of progress whereby each generation is assumed to be more 'enlightened' than the previous one. Secondly, it risks resulting in a kind of historical purge and a programmatic silencing of earlier voices. And thirdly the naming of second-wave radical feminism as 'authoritarian' is perhaps a little ironic, given that the trend for no-platforming and purity-testing carried out in the name of twenty-first-century social justice politics is at least as well suited to such a descriptor.

In an article written by a second-wave socialist feminist responding to some of the accusations levelled by twenty-first century feminists at 1970s activism, Linda Gordon argues that contemporary uses of intersectionality 'can signal a kind of pluralism, in which identities are represented as equivalents on a field of competing

interest groups’ and which then ‘rely on essentialist assumptions’.<sup>6</sup> Gordon adds that:

[T]he focus on representing various categories of people presupposes innate homogeneity within each category [...]. Thus efforts to bring representatives of different races or sex/gender identities may assume that each person represents her or his entire race, sexual preference, for example.<sup>7</sup>

A glance at the prominent website *Everyday Feminism*, which subtitles itself ‘Intersectional Feminism for your Everyday Life’, illustrates this at once atomizing and reifying tendency nicely, as its posts are organized according to categories, ranged in the toolbar, including: ‘race’, ‘disability’, ‘class’, ‘religion’, ‘trans and GNC’ (gender non-conforming).<sup>8</sup> Twenty-first-century intersectionality, then, at once promotes a particular version of individuality (so that each person needs to think themselves in terms of the particular multiple oppressions to which they are subject and the particular privileges from which they benefit – that then becomes the sum of their situated political identity), whilst simultaneously ignoring or censoring both systemic-oppression-aware or class-based analysis, such as that on which much second-wave feminism rested, and also the possibility of eccentric individual dissent or what I have called elsewhere ‘identity category violation’.<sup>9</sup> It also leads, potentially, as Naomi Zack points out in her call for a less divisive ‘inclusive feminism’ than intersectionality has spawned, to ‘a fragmentation of women that precludes common goals as well as basic empathy’.<sup>10</sup> The danger, then, lies *both* in imposing a very specific way of understanding individuality *and* in preventing the making of strategic common cause.

Further to Gordon's 'musings', it is important to recognize that the heuristic of intersectionality is not the only, and perhaps not the most fruitful, model with which to analyse the ongoing relevance of the contribution of out-of-favour second-wave white feminists to present-day concerns. In what follows I argue that queer theory, which refuses the reification of identity, may be the most fruitful framework with which to reassess the second wave. The model of power that was borrowed to mobilize queer theory is Michel Foucault's concept of a force-field of power relations, rather than a top-down hierarchy; a system in which 'there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary'.<sup>11</sup> While this de-centring of a dominant or hegemonic subject of resistance may sound convincingly intersectional at first glance, what is being described here is not a pluralization of *identities*, but precisely a rejection of identity *tout court* in favour of an understanding of a 'plurality of resistances'<sup>12</sup> – that is a plurality of resistant *strategies*. The model Foucault proposes for a better understanding of how power works is 'normative' power, a power that positions others as inside or outside of norms; as acceptable or unacceptable subjects and positions. A crucial insight for this kind of project, and one which is too seldom acknowledged, is that both the content and locus of normativity are not set in stone, but that hegemonic discourses *shift*. This applies to intersectionality. What was intended to be a strategy of resistance and dissidence when deployed by and for those marginalized by structural operations of (patriarchal, colonial) power, can become a hegemonic one, and can tend towards appropriation if it is co-opted, as in the case of the commercial exploitation of Dzodan's slogan. It can also become authoritarian if, in its name, unfashionable views are censored or closed down, rather than debated.

I will turn now to my case studies: Monique Wittig, the French materialist

feminist who is sometimes acknowledged as a forerunner of queer (though significantly less frequently than her French male counterparts such as Jean Genet and Michel Foucault – a lacuna Clare Hemmings has pointed out and that she has attempted to redress<sup>13</sup>), and Shulamith Firestone, the Anglo-American radical feminist whose work emerged contemporaneously in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> While Wittig has a place in both the canon of separatist lesbian feminism and (proto-)queer theory, Firestone, as a heterosexual second-wave radical feminist, has not been considered in the context of proto-queer thought. She has, however, recently been adopted and utilized by the branch of feminist theory and activism known as xenofeminism, which is a ‘labour of bricolage, synthesizing cyberfeminism, posthumanism, accelerationism, neorationalism, materialist feminism [...] in an attempt to forge a project suited to contemporary political conditions’.<sup>15</sup> Xenofeminism, as distinct from the current, most hegemonic, feminist discourse in the West – intersectionality – recognizes itself precisely as ‘a politics without “the infection of purity”’,<sup>16</sup> borrowing from discourses of which it can make use in a non-hierarchizing manner. The Deleuzian, posthumanist, and accelerationist elements of xenofeminism mark it out, however, from the queer perspective I am pursuing here since it imagines a subject of politics that is hybrid, post-human, and adaptive rather than resistant or counter-normative. However, the importance of the kind of work it is doing, especially in valorizing technology and rationality in an age in which ‘affect’ has become the dominant discourse in politics as in theory, should not be underplayed.<sup>17</sup>

Here, I will be arguing that the discourse and logic employed by Firestone with regard to the institution of the family, reproduction, maternity, and biological determinism are eminently ‘queer’, in terms of the strategies deployed, if obviously not ‘lesbian’ in terms of identity politics. That is, they are queer along the lines of

Michael Warner's post-Foucauldian definition of queer as that which provides 'resistance to regimes of the normal'.<sup>18</sup> Thinking Firestone's writing in this way – as a counter-hegemonic, thought-experiment-led project – helps to bring into focus some of the problems of the trend for hyper-identity politics that characterizes some recent feminism. Rethinking second-wave feminism as 'proto-queer', then, offers a re-evaluation of an important historical-political movement or set of movements.

This article will focus mainly on two works published within a year of each other: Wittig's experimental, non-linear novel of lesbian feminist revolution, *Les Guérillères* (1969)<sup>19</sup>, and Firestone's manifesto, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970).<sup>20</sup> In a series of intriguing ways, Wittig's novel thematizes and gives poetic voice, slightly *avant la lettre*, to Firestone's manifesto. Poignantly, Firestone wrote in *The Dialectic of Sex* of the historical absence of any properly feminist revolution that might serve as inspiration to her generation, adding 'Moreover, we haven't even a literary image of this future society; there is not even a *utopian* feminist literature yet in existence'.<sup>21</sup> Firestone would have been writing these words at the very time that *Les Guérillères* was being published in France.

### **Female Forebears and Revolutionary Visions**

One obvious first point of commonality between Firestone and Wittig is the degree to which both locate the politics and philosophy of their feminism within a genealogy at the head of which we find French forebear Simone de Beauvoir. Firestone claims in *The Dialectic of Sex* that 'of all feminist theorists De Beauvoir is the most comprehensive and far-reaching', citing in particular her insight that 'humanity is not an animal species, it is a historical reality'.<sup>22</sup> Wittig names her 1981 essay 'One is not born a woman' after De Beauvoir's oft-cited contention 'One is not born, but rather



becomes, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society...'.<sup>23</sup> And, building on this central tenet, Wittig's essay begins 'A materialist feminist approach to women's oppression destroys the idea that women are a "natural group"'.<sup>24</sup>

What both Firestone and Wittig seek to do in bringing together dialectical materialist approaches with a deployment of existentialist De Beauvoir is to challenge contemporary strands of feminist thought in each linguistic context that reify the 'naturalness' of woman and the deterministic significance of her biological condition. In the French context, this was understood to be women writing in the *Psych et Po* tradition – the exponents of *l'écriture féminine*.<sup>25</sup> In the Anglophone USA of the time, it was perhaps best exemplified by Mary Daly's controversial and anti-trans version of feminism, with its notion of a specific 'gyn/ergy' proper to women understood as a biological and psychological group (that very 'natural group' disputed by Wittig).<sup>26</sup> As material feminists, both Wittig and Firestone recognize that women's biology has been weaponized as a tool of patriarchal oppression. As Wittig writes: 'there is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses [...] the category of sex is the product of a heterosexual society which imposes on women the rigid obligation of the reproduction of the "species"'.<sup>27</sup> But both writers refuse to perpetuate the deterministic significance of biology when imagining lesbian futures (Wittig) and feminist revolt (Firestone). In this direction, Firestone writes: 'it has become necessary to free humanity from the tyranny of its biology'.<sup>28</sup> This is an eminently proto-queer way of thinking against reductive ontology, and one that places them squarely philosophically apart from many of their respective contemporaries.

The revolutionary societies imagined by Firestone and Wittig, in respectively manifesto and literary novelistic form, involve a radical re-imagining of the categories

of sexed and gendered identity. Having argued that women's relegation to the role of 'sex class' determines their/our continued oppression, Firestone writes: 'The end goal of feminist revolution must be [...] not just the elimination of male *privilege*, but of the sex *distinction* itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally'.<sup>29</sup> For Firestone, post-revolutionary society would no longer be organized on the basis of coupledness, heterosexual privilege, and nuclear families. Extending Freud's already expanded notion of Eros, Firestone imagines societies organized in cross-generational groups, in which sexuality is not understood as a distinct form of experience or feeling from friendship, and in which the 'belonging to' of romantic love in the courtly tradition and of father-wife-child hierarchies cease to have meaning. Firestone's utopia is a queer one in which, for all practical purposes, 'heterosex' and 'same-sex' have little residual meaning, since the sense of the terms 'men' and 'women' would be obsolete.

Addressing the same issue, Wittig, true to the lyrical and self-reflexive nature of her textual project, enacts, at the linguistic level, an overcoming of this previously meaningful distinction via a play with pronouns that is prescient. The post-revolutionary subjects of the society described in *Les Guérillères* will move through several stages of redefinition of the old binary sex-gender system, before renouncing it entirely. Wittig describes how, at one stage, the recently-victorious revolutionary subjects subvert the traditional French linguistic dominance paradigm of masculine over feminine, which holds that in a room containing ninety-nine women and one man, the collection of assembled humans will be referred to in the third person plural as 'ils' (masculine plural).<sup>30</sup> Post-revolutionary subjects, female and male, formerly plural 'ils' are temporarily united as collective 'elles' (feminine plural) at this point in the text, marking for the first time female social supremacy, before abandoning the

system of gendered hierarchy altogether.<sup>31</sup>

In imagining their utopian feminist societies, both authors seek to do away with work as an institution and as a structure for organizing the time, and ordering the use of space, of its citizen-subjects. Firestone writes of a society in which paid human labour is largely replaced by technology in the advanced cybernetic communism imagined, enabling work to be divorced from wages, allowing people to pursue occupations about which they are passionate, and freeing adults to spend time in creative play. Firestone also recognizes that some individuals, regardless of sex, function better as individuals; that not everyone will want to live in households of more than one or share caring duties. She writes that: 'each person would be totally self-governing as soon as she was physically able'.<sup>32</sup> This recognizes 'the radical idea that that women are people',<sup>33</sup> and as such that they have differing degrees of sociability, interest in others, capacity for and desire to engage in caring, and what psychologists would call introversion or extroversion.

Wittig, describes the post-revolutionary world thus:

They say, the prisons are open and serve as doss houses. They say that they have broken with the tradition of inside and outside, that the factories have each knocked down one of their walls, that offices have been installed in the open air, on the esplanades, in the rice-fields.<sup>34</sup>

These ways of reorganizing the experience of space and time – breaking down the categories of inside/outside, integrating work and play to remove the (according to Firestone, artificial) distinction between child and adult – may also remind us of

recent queer theorizations of time by authors such as Elizabeth Freeman and J. J. Halberstam.<sup>35</sup> But rather than positing ‘queer time’ as the exception that shows up the workings of mainstream (straight) time, the province of outliers, both Wittig and Firestone will queer time for *all* post-revolutionary citizens, replacing the narrative of the reproductive life cycle and the capitalistic rituals of production with more flexible and multivalent ways of spending time. And in *Les Guérillères*, Wittig organizes her fragmented text in a non-linear, non-chronological way, queering reading practice. The text consists of a collection of prose paragraphs, lines of verse intercut with the names of fallen female warriors, and circular symbols. Some of the prose paragraphs describe acts and events that are temporally located during the struggle of the *guérillères* for ascendancy, while some pre-date and others post-date the revolution. But the order in which Wittig presents us with them is apparently random, and our reading takes us forwards and backwards in time, creating a cyclical reading practice. This echoes some of the iconography of the text, such as the circular symbols that we learn are found on the pages of ‘feminaries’, sacred texts that the post-revolutionary women use to re-write a non-phallic, non-masculinist history and mythology for themselves – the self-representational tradition that was denied under patriarchy.<sup>36</sup>

The debunking or rewriting of myths of identity and ontology feature prominently as strategies of resistance to ‘regimes of the normal’ in both texts. And both seek to render identity categories ultimately redundant, rather than multiplying and shoring up new ones – an eminently queer move. Both Firestone and Wittig engage in the deconstruction of myths about the nature of women that are as dear to some feminists as they are to the patriarchy from which they issue. Firestone expresses particular ire for the persistent myth of women’s natural maternal instinct, which she names as one of the barriers to technological invention that would free

women from the expectation of pregnancy:

Fears of new methods of reproduction are so widespread that as of the time of this writing, 1969, the subject, outside of scientific circles, is still taboo. Even many women in the women's liberation movement – perhaps especially in the women's liberation movement – are afraid to express any interest in it for fear of confirming the suspicion that they are 'unnatural', wasting a great deal of energy denying that they are anti-motherhood, pro-artificial reproduction and so on.<sup>37</sup>

It is intriguing to note, given that the radical feminist revolution Firestone longed for has not happened, that attitudes and accompanying cultural and technological practices in this sphere have not changed as quickly or as much as other social attitudes and medical advances. One might suspect that the investment in keeping women reproducing the old-fashioned way, and putting energy into care-giving, works to the good of the prevailing social order, just as Firestone claimed.

While Firestone works to counter the commonplace idea that women are naturally predisposed to be life-givers and caretakers, Wittig similarly undoes the notion of women as the gentler sex, challenging the logic underpinning the feminist ethics of care which holds that women are not innately predisposed to violence and force, but rather to nurturance. The very title of *Les Guérillères* bespeaks the novelty of imagining the feminist warrior. For this is not simply the feminine version of the noun meaning 'warrior' (*le guerrier*) in French. That would be '*la guerrière*', which is a near homonym of Wittig's coining. But the neologism Wittig creates with its

extra 'L's echoes the plural feminine pronoun 'elles', while also drawing on the semantics of 'guerilla' ('guérilla' in French) It sits awkwardly and strangely in the mind and on the tongue. Firestone has stated: 'there have been women revolutionaries, certainly, but they have been used by male revolutionaries, who seldom gave even lip service to equality for women, let alone to a radical feminist restructuring of society'.<sup>38</sup> Wittig's inventive linguistic deformation articulates that *something extra* – not just, or not quite, a female warrior, but rather a warrior *for feminism*. (That the English translation leaves the French title intact engineers a parallel, if not quite identical, experience of an encounter with strangeness, newness – queerness – for the Anglophone reader.) Both Firestone and Wittig, then, resist the commonplace notions of what women *are* and what women are *for*: pacifistic, peaceful, life-giving, caregivers.

### **Shadow Sisters**

In their resistant re-imaginings of feminist subjects and societies, these texts can be said to enact and embody part of what J. Jack Halberstam means by the concept of 'shadow feminism', when they write in *The Queer Art of Failure* of 'an antisocial femininity, and a refusal of the essential bond of mother and daughter that ensures that the daughter inhabits the legacy of the mother and in doing so reproduces her relationship to patriarchal forms of power'.<sup>39</sup> In displacing the primacy of the mother-daughter bond (which Firestone rejects as produced by patriarchal insistence on the closeness of women and children), and replacing it with the kinship of intellectual feminist inheritance (the symbolic mother of both dialectical projects being Simone de Beauvoir), kinship is *strategic* and *chosen* rather than progenitors being determined, as in the patriarchal mode. What this also means is that feminist bonds

can be rationalized or intellectualized. This is an intriguing refusal of the ascription to women of both emotionalism and biological determinism, even if it is limited as a strategy by being only a reversal or inversion, rather than a thoroughgoing deconstruction of the binary.

The ideas in both authors' works regarding the normative and oppressive functions of maternity, the nuclear family, pacifistic femininity, and the institution of childhood, prefigure the so-called antisocial turn in twenty-first-century queer theory, most often associated with Lee Edelman, as well as with Halberstam and others. Antisocial queer describes a queerness that is not recuperable for the interests of the status quo, and that does not accept any form of assimilation. It issues instead a stark 'no' to the narrative of family values-inflected futurism. This branch of queer theory has, however, for all its anti-identitarian claims, been rather gay male in orientation. For example, Edelman's book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* of 2004, what we might call the bible of anti-social queer, posits a figure, borrowed from the system of Lacanian psychoanalysis – 'the *sinthomosexual*' – as the embodiment of a queer resistance to norms. (*Sinthome* means in psychoanalytic discourse both symptom and saintly man/ human. Edelman fuses the term with the word 'homosexual'.) This figure is not *per se* sexed or gendered, yet all of the literary and filmic figures Edelman chooses to illustrate the function of the *sinthomosexual* are male, including Ebenezer Scrooge, Hannibal Lecter, and various protagonists of Hitchcock's films. Where, then, we might ask, are the equivalent feminist figures of resistance to what Edelman calls 'reproductive futurity'? Quite simply, the answer might be that they are back in the 1970s. Wittig's revolutionary lesbian *guérillères*, who refuse the meaning of 'woman' as peaceful and submissive complement to man, and who forge new ways of being and living outside of the straight paradigm, are

such figures. Firestone's woman who refuses the cultural imperative of pregnancy and motherhood as natural and inevitable is such a figure. Firestone writes: 'pregnancy is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual *for the sake of the species*'.<sup>40</sup> She explicitly and repeatedly calls for a feminist future that is not organized around the reproductive lifecycle and in which maternity is not seen as inevitable.

Moreover, Firestone's work suggests ways of overcoming the individualism/collectivism binary that so much visionary political writing gets caught up in. As seen in the recognition that it is unacceptable to expect a given woman to sacrifice her bodily integrity 'for the sake of the species', Firestone recognizes that female selfhood has not yet been sufficiently articulated as a liveable possibility, such that *refusing to sacrifice* becomes a feminist act. This causes her to reflect upon her love, as a child, for those Donald Duck comics that featured Uncle Scrooge McDuck in the following terms: 'I loved the selfish extravagance of his bathing in money. (Many women – deprived of Self – have confessed the same girlhood passion.)'.<sup>41</sup> Just as Edelman uses the human Scrooge as an embodiment of the function of the *sinthomosexual*, so the young Firestone was fascinated by his animated, ducky alter-ego, and uses it to illustrate the shortage of available examples of female selfishness, female subjectivity, outside of the roles allocated to those in the sex-class. In the face of a series of *Stepford Wife* stereotypes for girls in the 1960s, one can see the rebellious pleasure found in identification with an imaginary figure whose self-regard and self-indulgence know no bounds, who will sacrifice itself for nothing. (That the figure chosen queers both gender and species is perhaps not incidental.)

Along similar lines, Wittig echoes the rebellion of refusing to sacrifice when she explains in 'The Straight Mind' how members of oppressed classes do not easily find themselves *as subjects* through collectivist struggles, such as Marxist politics,



which risk simply reinscribing their belonging to a class. She writes of the ‘real necessity for everyone to exist as an individual’, while arguing simultaneously that ‘without class and class consciousness there are no real subjects, only alienated individuals’.<sup>42</sup> In their different ways, then, Firestone and Wittig both queer the commonplace discourse that women are predisposed to commonality and group belonging, sounding the warning that dismissing the validity of a notion of selfish and self-interested female individuality perpetuates harmful and oppressive norms. This awareness on the part of writers of the second wave stands in stark contrast to much twenty-first-century feminist discourse, in which feminists are constantly reminded to police other feminists and themselves to ensure that they are centring others with less privilege in their activism. While one might *decide* to take on this intersectional ethic as a political project, it is a blanket *demand* that, I would contend, it is unreasonable of feminism to place on women.

### **Some Concluding Remarks**

The particular flavour of antisocial feminism offered by Firestone and Wittig, then, stands as a stark gesture of resistance to the commonly issued instruction to women to be for the other. It also provides a specifically feminist-voiced refusal of familiar and tainted narratives of sociality, family, and the future that are lacking in Edelman’s work. In an essay entitled ‘The Antisocial Turn in Queer Studies’ from 2008, Halberstam called for a queer that would be more indebted to punk than to Lacan, arguing that Edelman loses any claim to being radical precisely when he reveals his reverential thrall to male philosophical authorities and archetypes.<sup>43</sup> Yet, to argue that we need to take seriously Wittig and Firestone as alternative proto-antisocial voices is obviously not to claim ideological perfection for them. It is, rather, to do away with

the demand for ideological perfection. We should be able to acknowledge flaws and blindspots in a writer's work that are the effects of cultural-historical conditions without dismissing entirely their importance. So, Firestone's vision of a social organization outside of the nuclear family leads her to (what many have considered) ethically dubious speculations about the validity of intergenerational sex and the removal of the incest taboo. Similarly, as much recent feminist work has addressed, including other articles in this special issue, it needs to be acknowledged that much white feminist writing of the 1970s was neglectful of issues specifically affecting non-white women, poor women, and uneducated women. This is certainly true of Firestone, who tends to write of 'African Americans' and 'women', as if these terms pertain to distinct categories of social subject, rendering women of colour utterly invisible and silencing their specific intersectional issues, as identified by Crenshaw and others. And the pointed critique of pronatalism contained in both Firestone and Edelman doubtless operates with a white bias, given that some subjects (rich and/or white) are more incentivized to reproduce than others (poor and/or black), as in the case of the coerced sterilization of women of colour, unmarried mothers, and immigrants at various moments in twentieth-century US history.<sup>44</sup> Finally, in spite of her claims that, post-revolution, sex difference as we know it will disappear, as it is the effect of hetero-patriarchy, Firestone's text is at moments guilty of considerable heterosexual bias and naturalization of straight romantic tropes.

Returning purposefully to these texts, then, does not mean that we should simply ignore any ethical problems or lack of awareness of the material reality of other women that they propagate as a result of their positioning in time, space, and habitus. Similarly, in thinking about the intellectual sources they acknowledge, it must be noted that both Wittig and Firestone retain and extensively repurpose Marx

(and in Firestone's case, Freud), alongside De Beauvoir, as the basis for their theorization of materialist revolt and what I have been terming anti-normative resistance. It would perhaps be unfair to insist that, whereas Edelman's fidelity to Lacan renders him less than radical, these feminists' use of the names and ideas of their male intellectual forebears is wholly unproblematic. But, crucially, while it is reasonable to acknowledge some flaws and problems in the eccentric and visionary writing of Wittig and Firestone, it is not reasonable to consign them to history as relics, as too many already seem to have done, especially in the case of seldom-read Firestone. For, in numerous ways, the ideas, textual strategies, and forms of resistance to imposed *norms* that pass *as natural* or '*righteous*' in works by both of these writers make them significant precursors to ways of thinking that the queer academy and queer activism, as well as feminists of all stripes, would do well to engage with still today.

---

<sup>1</sup> Susan Archer Mann and Douglas J. Huffman, 'The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism and the Rise of the Third Wave', *Science and Society* 69:1 (2005), 56-91 (57).

<sup>2</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersections of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine', *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989), 139-167 (140).

<sup>3</sup> Flavia Dzodan, 'My Feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit!', *Tiger Beatdown*, <http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/>

---

<sup>4</sup> See: Aja Romana, ‘This feminist’s most famous quote has been sold all over the internet. She hasn’t seen a cent’, *Vox*,

<https://www.vox.com/2016/8/12/12406648/flavia-dzodan-my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-merchandise>

<sup>5</sup> Mann and Huffman, ‘The Decentering of Second Wave Feminism’, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Gordon, “‘Intersectionality’”, *Socialist Feminism and Contemporary Activism: Musings by a Second-Wave Socialist Feminist*, *Gender and History* 28:2 (2016), 340-357, 347.

<sup>7</sup> Gordon, “‘Intersectionality’”, 347.

<sup>8</sup> <https://everydayfeminism.com/>

<sup>9</sup> I use ‘identity category violation’, a play on the concept of ‘category violation’ borrowed from linguistics, to describe those subject positions that demonstrate the flimsiness (and logical falseness) of political group identity that often passes as monolithic. A key example of such an illegible political subject position would be the far-right-wing feminist-identified lesbian. Without appropriate tools to understand and analyze those who fall outside of the rules of identitarianism, we lack a means of comprehending difficult or unpalatable subject positions. See Lisa Downing, ‘The Body Politic: Gender, the Right Wing, and “Identity Category Violations”’, *French Cultural Studies* 29:4 (2018, in press).

<sup>10</sup> Naomi Zack, *Inclusive Feminism: A Third-Wave Theory of Women’s Commonality* (Oxford: Rowman and Little, 2005), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge, The History of Sexuality I* [1976], translated by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 95.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 96.

---

<sup>13</sup> Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> There has been considerably more critical attention paid to Wittig's ongoing relevance than to Firestone's, until very recently. Key critical works on Wittig include: Namascar Shaktini (ed.) *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005) and Benoît Auclerc and Yannick Chevalier, *Lire Monique Wittig aujourd'hui* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010). Two book-length works devoted to Firestone have been published since her death. They are: Mandy Merck and Stella Sandford (eds.), *Further Adventures of The Dialectic of Sex* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) and Victoria Margree, *Neglected or Misunderstood: The Radical Feminism of Shulamith Firestone* (London: Zero Books, 2018). Here, Margree argues for a serious reappraisal of Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, which has been described by Ann Snitow as a "demon text" of second wave feminism' (3).

<sup>15</sup> Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hester, *Xenofeminism*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> For the affective turn in theory see: *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, ed. Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007). The place of affect in the genealogy of thought is a significant one, given the othering of emotion for much of history, but feminist projects that associate feminist ethics with feeling (e.g. the 'ethics of care'), rather than undertaking an engagement with reason, risk perpetuating an age-old model in which women/ the feminine are aligned with feeling and the body; men/ the masculine with thought and spirit.

- 
- <sup>18</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xxvii.
- <sup>19</sup> Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères* [1969], translated by David Le Vay (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).
- <sup>20</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* [1970] (London: Paladin, 1972).
- <sup>21</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 211.
- <sup>22</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 16.
- <sup>23</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* [1949], translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier; introduction by Sheila Rowbotham (London: Vintage, 2014), P?
- <sup>24</sup> Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind' in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 9-20 (9).
- <sup>25</sup> Though it should be noted, as in Anne Emmanuelle Berger's contribution to this Special Issue, that recent scholarship is working to complexify the notion that this branch of feminist theory was straightforwardly biologically essentialist.
- <sup>26</sup> Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).
- <sup>27</sup> Wittig, 'The Category of Sex' in *The Straight Mind*, 1-8 (2; 6).
- <sup>28</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 183.
- <sup>29</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 19.
- <sup>30</sup> Currently, a campaign is afoot to reform the French language in order to avoid this sexist practice, under the name 'écriture inclusive'. The *Académie française* is proving, thus far, resistant to its aims. See, for example, this article in *Le monde* by Raphaëlle Rérolle as 13/12/2017:

---

[https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/12/13/ecriture-inclusive-malaise-a-l-academie-francaise\\_5228736\\_3232.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/12/13/ecriture-inclusive-malaise-a-l-academie-francaise_5228736_3232.html)

<sup>31</sup> This linguistic inversion of gendered power works, of course, in the heavily gendered French language in which Wittig writes, but fails to register in English translation. Indeed Le Vay's constant translation of 'elles' as 'the women' rather than 'they' silences the fact that sometimes those belonging to the class of person formerly known as men are being referenced in Wittig's plural 'elles'.

<sup>32</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 222.

<sup>33</sup> This definition of feminism has a contested origin. It is often attributed to Cherris Kramarae, but it has been argued that this is a misattribution and has been linked to Marie Shear. See: <http://www.beverlymcphail.com/feminismradicalnotion.html>

<sup>34</sup> Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, 131.

<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010); J. Jack Halberstam *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NYU Press, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, 51.

<sup>37</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 211.

<sup>39</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011), 124.

<sup>40</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 188.

<sup>41</sup> Firestone, *Dialectic*, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', 19.

<sup>43</sup> Judith Halberstam, 'The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies', *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5:2 (2008), 140-156.

---

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, J. David Smith, *The Eugenic Assault on America: Scenes in Red, White and Black* (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1992).